

Studying for what? The (de)valuation of high school in the speech of three generations

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Abstract

As the result of a research done in Mariana, a town in Minas Gerais, Brazil, we investigated the representations of school made by three generations of the same family, i.e., grandparents, parents and grandchildren. Based on a qualitative study, questionnaires were filled in by ninety-six students graduating from high school, from both sexes, in two public schools of Mariana, who live with their parents and grandparents. Five students' parents and grandparents were selected based on the questionnaire analysis about generational relationships, in order to know the changes throughout the years in the relationship, professional and training expectations for the young people. Among other things, it was observed that school is an institution valued by the family, mainly because it is seen as an effective way to get a good job, although there are differences on the view of the school role between different generations of the same family. Parents consider that the focus is on the individual, i.e., the scholar's and professional success are considered merit of the student, who must have interest and determination to accomplish their goals. Grandparents consider school the center of education and the largest responsible for the performance of a student in their scholar and professional life.

Keywords: Family-school relationship. Generations. High school.

Introduction

Over the years, it is possible to observe many changes in intergenerational relationship and, hence, how the elderly interfere in younger people's lives and choices. Influenced by social, economical and historical transformations for those that the contemporary society has been through, the intergenerational relationship impact directly and indirectly on the lives of young people, as much in their socialization network, as in their academic and professional choices. As well as the relationship with adults and elderly, like parents, uncles, grandparents, teachers, etc. interfere in the young people's lives projects, the school also constitutes itself as an agent able to offer choices and possibilities for the professional future.

In Feixa and Leccardi's (2010) understanding, from the moment when biographical and historical time synchronize, the notion of generation is created in sociological terms. This means, in practice, that in the same chronological period, different age groups experience different interior time. To Mannheim (1964 *apud* WELLER, 2007), the term generation relates to the common position of those born in the same chronological time given by the possibility of witnessing similar events or experiencing similar experiences. Still according to the author, Mannheim draws attention to the fact that the unity of a generation does not consist in a dedicated

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membership to create specific groups concerned to constitute a social cohesion. Although occasionally some generational units will constitute specific groups such as youth movements, among which we could mention the 1968 Student Movement.⁴

It is relevant to consider the perception of different generations about the school and its importance to the training of young people in contemporary debates about youth and fundamental to this study, which proposed to listen to subjects belonging to the same family unit, but from different generations (grandparents, parents and children) about their expectations about the role of the school in high school for the training of young people.

The discussion about family arrangements⁵, considering the generational characteristics, is still open, but it is known that the power relations between different generations in the family group are not immutable. Such relationships are directly influenced, among others, by the coexistence between members of the group and the mobilization of the family and young people in realizing their projects for the professional future.

Families, in recent decades, have experienced bigger negotiation between its members, and groups, that until recently had little decision-making power, have been empowered (BARROS, 2006; SINGLY, 2007). This is the case of children, the elderly and women, who are not only heard more, but who directly interfere in family decisions. The young people's opinion also tend to be considered more in family decisions and, on them, have been deposited hopes and expectations of a successful future career.

According to Lahire (2007), sociology still has much to learn about childhood and youth, in a present characterized by multiple socialization with joint and contradictory influences of family, peer groups and school. Consequently, in the current social context of easing capital and cultural ties, values and expectations of elderly no longer constitute as a guideline of life for young people, although they influence directly and indirectly in the exchange of experiences.

This article presents the results of an investigation with 96 young people who, at the time of the research, attended high school in public schools in Mariana, Minas Gerais, Brazil, as well as their parents and grandparents about prospective employment for their future. To better understand the factors that influence the choices and future plans of boys and girls of the lower classes, we reflected on the role of the school and the importance of secondary education in the lives of young people and their families.

Living as a youth from the 1950s to the 1980s, most parents and grandparents of those who have concluded or are concluding high school currently had life experiences marked by school structures and labor market settings very different from the current one. Moreover, the different generations have also suffered and still suffer from the direct influence of values and predominant family structure in each historical period.

Assuming that such influences mark the collection of standards and requirement

4 Domingues (2002) states that the concept of generations in Mannheim is not static, but open to the manifestation of subjectivity. According to the author ... "Generations have been divided into classes, genders and races ever since. However, the pluralization of lifestyles, the multiplication of "tribes" and groups with particularly distinct sensibilities and aesthetic preferences, but sometimes also with different behaviors, sharpens the heterogeneity of these collective subjectivities" (2002, p. 69).

5 The concept of family arrangements used in this text is based on Bourdieu and Passeron (1975) and it corresponds to the believes, way to act, think and feel, elaborated and transmitted consciously and/or unconsciously into the familiar environment.

of one generation to another, this research has raised study questions such as: what are the parents and grandparents' representation about the role of the school in the education of young people? What are the family's expectations about the future of these young men/women? Do the older generations (grandparents and parents) act the same way in the formation of these young men and women? Thus, to guide the research, the general objective of analyzing the different expectations of three generations in the study about the role of the school in school education of these young people was outlined.

Some of the characteristics of the city and its people have made this research important. The city of Mariana, today, has just over 58,000 inhabitants (IBGE, 2014). Located in Minas Gerais, it is only 145 km from the state capital, the access to the city is facilitated by ground transportation options. It has two federal public university campuses and several graduate courses offered by private universities (in-person and distance). Although the young people in this research have easy access to schools, the same did not happen with their parents and grandparents from, in almost all of the cases, rural areas.

The construction of the research

The research was based on a qualitative approach, using the descriptive and exploratory methodologies. Fieldwork was conducted in two state schools in Mariana and the selection criteria was mainly for the location of the institutions, a more central and the other in a peripheral neighborhood, which gives a social and economic diversification increase of the subjects investigated. From each school were chosen, not randomly, two classrooms of the 3rd year of high school in shifts offered by institutions (morning and evening), totaling four groups investigated.⁶

The criteria for the students' participation in the survey were the greater proximity between the three generations (if living with grandparents and parents) and the perception of greater intergenerational conflict over the studies. Questionnaires were administered to all students who attended these criteria, regardless of gender, race and status in the labor market. In total, 96 students were selected, 47 attended the morning shift and 49 evening shifts. The questionnaires were self-administered in the classroom and, after tabulating the data on the IBM-SPSS, five families were chosen for the interview in which grandparents, parents and grandchildren had higher living.

Interviews were conducted with grandparents (grandmother and/or grandfather) and parents (father and/or mother) in the students' homes. The statements were recorded and notes were taken by the researchers about the living conditions, socioeconomic status, number of household members, etc. After the recording, the interviews were transcribed and made available for analysis.

All students and their families signed the consent form (TCLE) and the project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Ouro Preto.

Family and school: institutions in a changing process

The fall of the quality of education offered by the public school has no consensus among researchers who advocate the need to consider three instances that have

⁶ Due to the heterogeneity of the age profile of students of EJA (Youth and Adult Education), it was decided not to include this group in the sample.

undergone radical changes over the past four decades: family, politics and school (RICCI, 2003; CARVALHO, 2004). These authors indicated the social changes that decisively influenced the formation of children and young people and, among these main elements are the power relations of class, race and gender.

It is possible to accept that such changes have contributed, including, for the extension of the juvenile condition in recent years due to the combination of two factors: the most time spent in school and the difficulty of entering the labor market, which result in delaying the achievement of economic independence from the parental home (KRAUSKOPF, 2010). Thus, until the 1970s, the insertion in the labor market was constituted as a framework for financial self-sufficiency and therefore as a symbol of family independence. Based on Arnett (2006), Brandão and Saraiva Matos (2012, p. 301) highlight the extension of the age and the absence of rites of passage so strongly marked by the late twentieth century in the industrial society.

40 years ago, a young man of 22 or 23 years old expected to become an adult, taking as reference the marriage, parenthood and getting a stable job. Currently, the deinstitutionalization of social markers that defined the transition modes between the stages of life, individuals have to take responsibility to construct meaning for their life trajectory.

The school model, focused on professional training, reflected this clear transition between childhood and adulthood marked by work. However, today, this achievement in the young people's lives has not been accompanied by leaving their parents' house, or the experience of the first job, and families, in turn, are in very different situations than the 1970s. According to Singly (2007, p. 170):

The family does not disappear, but changes direction. Instead of imposing on its members, the family becomes somehow a service that can be made available to the individuals concerned in living together.

Contributing decisively to this "change of direction", pointed out by Singly (2007) in the excerpt above, are the changes in the situation of women who, until the 1970s, almost exclusively assumed the housework and responsibility for the education of the children. Families are constituted, therefore, as the main child socialization agents, and did not share that responsibility with the school before the children complete at least seven years.

Note that the recent changes in family structure and changes in power relations in school and family are key elements to understand the universe that permeates the lives of young people and the relationship between family and school in recent decades. When investigating the construction of this universe, Nogueira, Romanelli and Zago (2003, 2013) offer points for reflection and analysis of the functioning of the school system, emphasizing the point of view of the family approach as inseparable institution of their social environment and their community. According to the authors, there is a hard line with regard to the values and objectives of each of these institutions.

Paro (2000, p. 16), in his study of the role of the family in the school development of elementary school students, walks in the same direction of Nogueira, Romanelli and Zago (2003) when he states that the gap between school and family should not

be so great, but it is inevitable since the school has not “assimilated almost nothing of all the progress of educational Psychology and Didactics, using very similar methods of teaching and identical to common sense prevailing in family relations.” Thus highlighting the anachronism of the school system, the author refers to the fact that the current school children attend is very similar to the school that the parents attended. However, the distance is accentuated when it comes to years of schooling.

This situation is different in relation to the grandparents, because they feel the huge jump between the education system of the time they studied for today, both in relation to the content of the subjects as the school structure, as to the subjects. Such temporal distance and teaching resources interfere in many cases the relationship between the young and the rising generations who attended school for less time and seized different content. While the teachers admit the need for the involvement of parents in school, they do not know how to deal with it, as discussed by Lahire (2007). In this sense, Paro (2000, p. 68) brings the following argument on the communication between teachers and parents: “There seems to be, on the one hand, a disability of the parents on understanding what is transmitted in school; On the other hand, a lack of ability of teachers to promote this communication.” Consequently, the cases of poor performance, dropout and failure are exclusively attributed to the lack of student commitment and family commitment to education of children and youth.

The school, as an institution, is also affected by the transformations that families and society, in general, are going through. It needs to understand that it is essential for the dialogue with the students, their families and the community, to consider the economic capital and cultural capital⁷ present in their students’ families, as well as the education of the parents, the neighborhood where they live, the schools they attend, the class and groups they are part of, and, consequently, friends and colleagues they have (LAHIRE, 2007).

Indeed, young people and youth today are still not ready and determined to follow a path, and the labor market structure that we find today is radically different from three decades ago (MADEIRA, 2006), requiring of them a preparation that goes beyond basic education, with specific knowledge of the area of operation and the development of professional skills. So, in the midst of their search for identity, this population is influenced by previous generations, but is compelled to seek their professional future from other training and information sources. Therefore, it is important to consider that, even subject to family rules and having the family as a privileged space for the construction of the children’s self-image, young people are not reduced to such influences (LAHIRE, 1997, SARTI, 2004), so it is important to consider them as an active part of their own route.

According to Dayrell (2003, p. 42), to know the young and their future projects is important that stereotypes about youth as a “becoming”, or even as a stage of crisis and hedonism, are to be overcome.

Building a youth concept from the perspective of diversity implies, first, it is no longer tied to strict criteria, but as part of a totalizing growth process, which is specific contours in all the experiences of the individuals in their social context. It means not understand the youth as a step to a predetermined order, much

7 Look up Bourdieu (1998) about the economic and cultural capital.

less as a time of preparation to be overcome to reach adulthood.

Thus, Dayrell (2003) draws our attention to the complexity and the need for reflection on the many influences and pressures experienced by different groups of young people.

Some research findings

From the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews it was noted that the school is not seen by most of the young people as directly responsible for their preparation for the labor market. Thus, 42.7% of interviewees believe that school is important in their lives by interfering in getting a better job, but 69.8% think that the school does not prepare students for the job market.

These results lead us to make an inquiry about the possible devaluation of cultural property coveted by the middle classes and for many families of the popular classes: the diploma. Were the young people interviewed with no hope of achieving social mobility through diploma or disenchanted with the high school? Such questioning was deepening when wondered about the expectations for the labor market for young people.

Questionnaires also revealed that students have little confidence in the labor market. Thus, 77.1% of interviewees claimed that the labor market currently is reasonable or bad for the young, and the school should, in addition to passing more general lessons for life, offer vocational education. However, most states that this role is not being properly fulfilled (74%). Note that, while not believing in the school as an institution that prepares students for the job market, students realize the influence of individual school performance in their professional future. Although they do not fully trust the school as an important institution for the achievement of a good job, the majority (65%) stated that student performance is crucial for their integration in the labor market, which shows, as seen in Bourdieu (1998), Lahire (2007) and Paro (2000), self responsibility of the young for their school and professional failure or success.

Among the total of investigated students: 57 of them only studied and 63 have worked with only 25 with paid work for less than a year. Among those currently employed, most work more than 20 hours per week.

Complete an undergrad is the goal of many respondents and only 13.5% want to enter the labor market as soon as completing high school; 52% of students intend to take a university degree and 26% a technical course. The plan to continue education is directly linked to motivation for the achievement of better jobs, as they recognize that eleven years invested studies, at least to complete the basic education, will not be enough for better employability. This desire of the majority, about entering university, led us to think more about the issues mentioned above, especially if what we are observing in the search field is a possible devaluation of the diploma or disenchantment with the high school. What we see is that, given the strong desire to continue studying demonstrated by young people, the diploma has been increasingly valued, but there is a discredit of high school as a teaching level that enable better jobs.

In the question “*what motivates you to study?*”, the vast majority of students (95.8%) answered the with the option: “*I study for a better future*”. This data

demonstrates a pragmatic view of young people in the role of the school and is consistent with the literature that education is the investment that represents in a capitalist society the increase in worker productivity and consequently higher performance (BARTALOTTI; MENEZES-FILHO, 2007).

Although with low education (37.5% of parents and 51% of mothers only have completed elementary school), parents believe in school as an institution able to provide information necessary for the formation of the young⁸. Parents want the school, besides instructing their children, to educate them in the broadest sense of the word, that is, to convey moral values, patterns of behavior and ethical principles. Such credit given to school is clear in the financial assistance to the children in the study (66.7%), but this aid does not refer to homework, because their education does not allow it, but comes through the purchase of school supplies, books, etc.

As expected in the research, the greater the distance between generations, the higher the schooling difference. Therefore, 85.4% of students claim they do not receive any assistance from grandparents in the studies. When this occurs, it is also higher in the financial context than in the academic, but in only two cases, grandparents help in homework and school works.

The effort of the interviewed families in the education of children was clear, but it is known that in the middle class, such mobilization occurs in a more effective way and targeted manner. According to Bourdieu (1998), the children are encouraged to make a school effort and to have an *ethos* of social mobility and aspiration to success and the acquisition of culture. However, there is, in the speech of the parents and especially the children interviewed, the perception that access to “good jobs” is not for everyone.

When asked if there was conflict in the family because of studies, most young people (83.3%) claimed not. Note that, even considering those who work during the day and have little time to study, there is little family disagreement about the time devoted to studies. Most (64%) states that they find freedom in the family to talk about their future prospects. However, even if they have more dialogue with parents and other relatives, 61.5% of respondents believe it is the family economic position that most directly influence the expectations and career choices. The absence of conflicts between parents and children may indicate that there is a good family relationship or that parents do not have enough knowledge, neither about school nor the labor market, to disagree with the choices of the children, or even to talk about future steps in schooling. Moreover, the fact that more than half of the students claim that the economic situation of families influence the career choices of children leads us to reflect on how significant is the impact of family arrangements and intergenerational relations in expectations and future projects of young people.

In interviews with parents, it was revealed that all of them, without exception, believe that the school is essential in the lives of children, and that the labor market currently offers more opportunities than in the time that parents and interviewed grandparents were young but these interviewees also recognize that, today, the market requires greater specialization and increasingly study. Parents say the school should prepare students for the labor market, but recognize that this is not effective, and still believe, as well as their children, that the behavior and performance of students influence the professional future of these. All parents

8 Grandparents' speech demonstrate that they also believe that the knowledge offered by the school is sufficient and adequate to let the young people ready for the labor market and for life in society.

demonstrate the desire for children to study more, but they are not clear about the degree of study that is possible for them. A significant fact was that only one of the mothers used the term college/university during the interview.

The findings were understood in the light of the literature used in this article. Paro (2000), Nogueira, Romanelli and Zago (2003) and Lahire (1997; 2007) point to the gap between what is taught in school and the world of the student, which results, among others, a lack of immediate sense with which these young people face during the study stage. The school appears as the only alternative to the families of popular classes for social mobility, hence its value. However, there is a lack of parental familiarity with the school world (language, requirements, culture) and the difficulty of moving between different educational spheres, revealing the little socially inherited cultural baggage (provisions) and objective components, external the individual and that can contribute to the success and school longevity (NOGUEIRA; NOGUEIRA, 2004).

Resuming the analysis of Bourdieu (1998) and Nogueira and Nogueira (2004), the popular family units dedicate themselves to the education of their children, however, this effort is not enough for young people to acquire the essential conditions for the placing desired in the labor market and this influences directly in their ambitions for the future. Students are clear that high school does not offer conditions for acquiring the desired job and, therefore, technical or university education is the path suggested as an alternative.

In the case of the generation of grandparents, the perceived distance between the labor market and the diploma offered by the high school is even lower. From the transcript of grandparents' speech, we realize that all of them also value the school. They think it is better today than at the time they studied and, like the parents of the young people interviewed, they acknowledge that there was an improvement in the labor market in relation to the opportunities offered, but few realize the new requirements. The elders also believe the school should prepare young people for the labor market and the performance and behavior of students influence the professional future of these, however, their familiarity with the school environment is even lower than parent and, therefore, fail to realize clearly what the desired (and possible) future for grandchildren.

We can learn from these data brought by questionnaires and interviews that the school is still a valued institution for three generations, mainly because it is interpreted as the primary means to get a good job and a "better future". However, young people showed a more pessimistic view than the previous generations. For 74% of the students, the school should convey general knowledge to life and offer vocational education. In their opinion, the school does not fulfill its role and therefore does not prepare them for the labor market, but argue that the students' posture interferes in this process, i.e., school performance affects the professional future. They are also not confident about the labor market, most of the students claim that this market is fair or poor, which contradicts the speech of parents and grandparents that the labor market is very good and promising, by having several job opportunities for new generations.

Such skepticism of young people about the school is also reflected in the plans they make for the future. Students are looking for greater specialization, as they recognize that high school will not guarantee better placement in the labor market

that is increasingly demanding. Thus, more and more young people have studied with the sole purpose to prepare for getting a good job or, in the case of those already working, to get a better job placement (CHARLOT, 2002). These data bring us the disenchantment of a generation in relation to the learning provided by the high school that, as pointed out by the authors referenced in this article, has approached the reality of student and has not fulfilled his proposal to form individuals with important knowledge for adulthood or even prepare them for the job market.

Final considerations

After reading the data from questionnaires given to students of the 3rd year of high school and the interviews with the families, it is noted that the family relationship and school brings nuances that can be explored from different angles and analysis matrices. As Cunha (2003) shows, the family is the institution that accredits the school the responsibility for instructing and educating their children, while the school expects parents to understand and share with its work.

Thus, although they do not believe that the school is doing its job properly, young people from public schools investigated feel the anguish of having their diplomas devaluated and have to struggle more and more to achieve higher levels of education. They bring upon themselves the responsibility of a good school performance, because they believe that personal effort will guarantee them advantages. However, with the selective labor market, eleven years of study are far from guaranteeing a profession that brings comfort and the professional achievement that they wish.

It is recognized, therefore, that education has been perceived as a condition of future career, in other words, complete secondary education is the growth of these opportunities. The possibility of entering the labor market and professional success are still closely related to school success. Thus, it is important to note the weight that educational institutions have on the subject: how they organize themselves forward to future plans, how they share experiences and paths with their peers, the way they trace their destination, even in spite of all adversity that they often face. The literature brought in this article shows that this mobilization of several generations of low-income families for the education of young people brings at the same time, expectation and disappointment with the school because of the devaluation of the diploma in the labor market. It is an unequal race, in which the working classes are at a disadvantage. Having no familiarity with the school culture, the parents and grandparents of the young people investigated little understand the market game and the education process and perhaps, therefore, remain optimistic.

By choosing to hear three generations in the family we could see that the credit given to school changes from generation to generation. Grandparents are not aware of the obstacles that the current labor market brings to the young low-income and the inequality of opportunities in this market. Centered on the structure and the possibility of access to school today, they believe that today's education quality has improved a lot when compared to the past. The perception increases in parents' generation, but they do not realize the importance of the role of the university or specialization courses as educational levels (in)accessible to their social layer. The biggest disappointment with the school is from the young man/woman who, with few family arrangements, understands the logic of the market better than previous generations, recognizing the need of great personal and family effort to get achieve

their professional goals.

While acknowledging that the school does not fulfill its function well, there is a mobilization of families for the schooling process. This research has shown that there is proximity between parents and children in dialogue about plans for the future, however, it was not possible to see at what level we can see this dialogue and whether parents understand the difficulties and dilemmas faced by their children in the process of choice (albeit limited) of their professional future.

In conclusion, we hope that studies like this can help further researches on the role of secondary education in the life of the lower classes of young people, as well as the mode of socialization of young people and how they deal with expectations that previous generations deposited on their future. On the other hand, it is interesting to continue watching the growing importance that the educational institutions have been taking over the years on the subject from the way these are organized in the future, as they share experiences and paths, etc., even despite all the adversities that they often face.

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